

LINCOLN LORE

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A DYNASTY OF LINCOLN GOVERNORS

At the time Abraham Lincoln was born one of his kinsmen, Levi Lincoln, was Governor of the State of Massachusetts. No one then, however, associated the humble family living in a cabin in Kentucky with the first family of the proud old State of Massachusetts, although the babe in the log house and the chief executive in the state house were both descendants of Samuel Lincoln, who settled at Hingham, Massachusetts.

Levi Lincoln and his brother, Dr. Abraham Lincoln, both residing at Worcester, Massachusetts, were powerful factors in New England politics for more than a quarter of a century. Levi Lincoln established what we might call a political dynasty, paving the way for two of his own sons to occupy governor's chairs. He did not live long enough, however, to see his sons achieve the honor which he himself had won.

Levi Lincoln, Jr., oldest son of Levi, Sr., was the first one of the boys to reach a governor's chair, having been elected to that office by the State of Massachusetts in 1825, receiving 35,000 of the 37,000 votes cast. He was continuously reelected to the office for seven years and served until November, 1833, when he voluntarily withdrew from being a candidate. Although Massachusetts has had more than fifty governors since the state has been in the Union, not one of them has served a continuous term of office equal to the incumbency of Levi Lincoln, Jr. One of his last official acts was performed in 1864, when, as presidential elector, he cast his vote for his kinsman, Abraham Lincoln.

Two years after Levi Lincoln, Jr., started on his long career as Governor of Massachusetts, his younger brother, Enoch, was elected Governor of the State of Maine. For three consecutive terms, beginning in 1826, he was elected Governor with the approbation of both political parties, and was well on his way to rival the record of his brother, Levi, when ill health forced him to withdraw his name for the candidacy. That same year he passed away.

During the period from 1825 to 1833, while Levi Lincoln Jr., was serving with distinction as Chief Executive of Massachusetts, and including the years from 1826 to 1829 when Enoch Lincoln was occupying the Governor's chair in Maine, Abraham Lincoln out in Illinois was growing up from a sixteen-year-old lad to a young man twenty-five, working in turn as railsplitter, boatman, soldier, clerk, surveyor, merchant, postmaster, until finally he was elected in 1834, a member of the Legislature of Illinois. Still later, in 1846, he was sent to Congress.

After Lincoln's term in Congress it is quite natural to expect that some lucrative appointment would be forthcoming in appreciation for the services he had rendered to the Whig cause. It has been generally accepted that at this time the Governorship of Oregon was offered to him. Beveridge concludes that because no record of such a tender has been discovered that the offer was not made available. This conclusion based on a negative assumption is not in harmony with the statements of those who were close to Lincoln at the time.

It seems, from what written testimony we do have on the subject, that Lincoln had been given a commission as Secretary of Oregon and two days after receiving it declined the office, as will be observed by the contents of the following letter:

Springfield, Illinois, Sept. 27, 1849.

Hon. J. M. Clayton
Secretary of State

Dear Sir:

Your letter of the 17th inst. saying you had re-

ceived no answer to yours informing me of my appointment as Secretary of Oregon, is received, and surprises me very much—I received that letter, accompanied by the Commission, in due course of mail, and answered it two days after, declining the office, and warmly recommending Simeon Francis for it. I have also written you several letters since, alluding to the same matter, all of which ought to have reached you before the date of your last letter.

Your Obt. Servt.
A. Lincoln

It would appear that after the post of Secretary of Oregon had been offered Lincoln and had been rejected, some of his friends then became interested in securing the governorship for him. Lincoln's former law partner, Stuart, is one of the informants who claims the place was offered to Lincoln.

It is evident from Lincoln's correspondence that John Addison had been working to this end and there are other considerations which make one conclude that Lincoln looked with some favor on the prospects of going to Oregon. The Addison letter follows:

Springfield, Illinois, September 27, 1849.

John Addison, Esq.

My dear Sir: Your letter is received. I cannot but be grateful to you and all other friends who have interested themselves in having the governorship of Oregon offered to me; but on as much reflection as I have had time to give the subject, I cannot consent to accept it. I have an ever abiding wish to serve you; but as to the secretaryship, I have already recommended our friend, Simeon Francis, of the "Journal." Please present my respects to G. T. M. Davis generally, and my thanks especially for his kindness in the Oregon matter.

Yours as ever,
A. Lincoln.

Most of the Lincoln biographers have felt that Mrs. Lincoln's reluctance to go to Oregon was largely responsible for Lincoln's refusal to accept the governorship. She may have had at least one good reason for this step; she had two small children in the home. The youngest child, Edward Baker Lincoln, who died on February 1, 1850, was named for Edward Baker, who was the U. S. Senator from Oregon in 1860.

Lincoln always took a vital interest in the affairs of Oregon. Possibly he would have been even more interested in the state if he had known that Marcus Whitman, the hero and martyr of Oregon was a descendant of one of his own New England forebears.

One of the first occasions on which Lincoln must have recalled the incidents relating to the Oregon governorship was on Washington's birthday, February 22, 1856. At a meeting in Decatur on that day, which some historians feel should mark the beginning of the Republican Party, a toast was offered to Abraham Lincoln as a "candidate for governor." In reply Lincoln said that it would not do to have him, an old line Whig, on the ticket; so Lincoln's second opportunity to occupy a governor's chair went by default.

If the dynasty of governors set up by the eastern Lincolns had also engulfed the western branch of the family, it is doubtful if the sixteenth President of the United States would have been Abraham Lincoln.